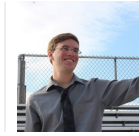




FROM THE BLEACHERS
From the Bleachers:
Breaking Down March
Madness, Games to



FROM THE BLEACHERS
From the Bleachers:
Should Barkley Go First
Overall in NFL Draft



FROM THE BLEACHERS
From the Bleachers:
MLB Teams Most Likely
to Return to Playoffs,

Predicting Champions League Semifinalists After First Leg



Photographer Alyssa Barber

Dominic Hoscher, FHNGameday.com editor, points to the field on the bleachers of FHN.

By Dominic Hoscher, FHNGameday.com Editor

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Filed under From the Bleachers, Opinions, Professional Sports, Sports, Sports Opinions

For most fans, April is one of the most exciting months in sports. February had the Super Bowl and Olympics, and March consisted of the NCAA tournament, but neither can truly compare to April. There's both the Stanley Cup and NBA playoffs, golf's most prestigious tournament in The Masters, the start of the MLB regular season, and the continuation of the UEFA Champions League. There's even the NFL Draft.

While there's plenty to dive into, this week's column  primarily be based on the MLB and Champions

League. In baseball, the Houston Astros are coming off a World Series-winning 2017 campaign and are looking even stronger this time around, both on paper and on the field. They have the talent to make another historic run, but will that be enough to repeat as World Series champions?

The past week in European soccer was one full of many lopsided score lines. Heavy favorites FC Bayern, Real Madrid, and FC Barcelona all took care of business in the first leg rather comfortably while Liverpool overcame their English rivals Manchester City 3-0 in a match that left the soccer world in shock.

The four winners are in great shape heading into the second leg next week, but the Champions League is known for its' twists and turns, especially in this round of the tournament. Will the expected semifinalists prosper, or will the soccer universe be left in bewilderment yet again?

MLB

When it comes to the term "Dream Team," it can often be tossed around loosely. On occasion, all it takes for some fans to call their favorite team a version of a dream team is to collect a couple of stars. There are some that refer to the Golden State Warriors as the NBA's dream team. The only group that has earned the title indisputably is the 1992 US men's basketball team.

The 2018 Houston Astros are ready for a dispute.

Last season, Houston won their first World Series in their 56 year history. Usually for a team that is just coming off a championship win, the goal, first and foremost, in the following offseason is to keep the pieces together while also finding ways to improve if possible. To accomplish the first of the two objectives, the Astros were able to lock up star and face of the franchise Jose Altuve last month on a five year, \$151 million deal.

Houston was able to secure the team's best player in Altuve for the foreseeable future just weeks before the start of the season. Before this, they already had one of the more well-rounded teams in the league. The lineup is made up of young stars such as Carlos Correa, George Springer, and Alex Bregman to go along with Altuve. In the rotation, Houston had a dominant front three in Dallas Kuechel, Justin Verlander, and Lance McCullers that was up there with the best trios in the game.

The Astros didn't necessarily have to make any moves in order to remain a top contender, but that's when they decided to go out and make their rotation even stronger by acquiring former Pirates ace Gerrit Cole. In his career, Cole has a 60-42 record with a 3.48 ERA and 12.2 WAR. For most teams, he's their number one starter and gets the ball on opening day. For the Astros, he'll be the number four starter behind

How far will the Houston Astros go this season?

- Miss the playoffs
- Make it to the ALDS
- Claim a spot in the ALCS
- Reach the World Series
- Win the World Series

Vote

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Kuechel, Verlander, and McCullers.

On paper, the Astros have the strongest roster in the majors. While it's early and a small sample size, the questions as to whether or not this will reflect onto the field as well have seemingly been answered by the team's 6-2 start to the season. Between the star-studded lineup and lights-out rotation, Houston is as close to a dream team in baseball as there is, and are deservedly the favorites to repeat as World Series champions in 2018.

Soccer

The first leg of the Champions League quarter finals contained everything from dominant performances by some of the world's biggest teams to jaw-dropping moments that left millions in utter disbelief. The most notable of these moments came in Turin, Italy where Juventus took on Spanish giants Real Madrid. Madrid, heading into the 64' minute, were already in a golden position with an away goal and a 1-0 advantage. That's when a legendary player performed something spectacular to turn the tie completely in the Spanish side's favor.

After Juventus mishandled the ball in the back, Madrid right back Dani Carvajal sent a cross into middle where Cristiano Ronaldo was waiting and raised up and scored a majestic bicycle goal that left everyone in Turin and the soccer world stunned. Ronaldo was able to show athleticism well beyond his age to find the bottom corner where Gianluigi Buffon had no chance of stopping it. This shifted the momentum in the match entirely, and led to a Paulo Dybala red card moments later and a final score of 3-0 in favor of Madrid. Heading back to Spain for the second leg, Real Madrid can safely be placed into the semi final drawing.

Out of the four teams that won in the first leg, who is most likely to go on and win the UEFA Champions League?

- Real Madrid
- FC Barcelona
- Liverpool
- FC Bayern

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Also putting together a comfortable win in the opening leg was Madrid's heavy rivals FC Barcelona. The first two goals for Barcelona weren't pretty, as both were knocked in by AS Roma into their own net. Just four minutes after the second own goal, unlikely goalscorer Gerard Pique was able to find the back of the net to extend Barca's lead to 3-0 over the Italians. While Roma was able to get one back of their own behind a goal by Edin Dzeko, Barcelona quickly responded through Luis Suarez and won the match by a score of 4-1.

The Spaniards dominated the opening round of the quarterfinals, and did it without their star man getting onto the score-sheet. Despite not scoring, Lionel Messi was a force all game long making the run that led to the first Roma own goal and challenged goalkeeper Alisson multiple times

after piercing through the Italian side's defense.

If Barcelona can win by such a dominant scoreline without Messi finding the back of the net, then how much of a chance does Roma have of overcoming the three-goal deficit in the second leg and holding off the Argentine for a second straight game? It's not likely and even though they'll be playing in the comforts of home, Roma has as much of a chance of advancing to the semi finals as the United States men's soccer team does of winning this year's World Cup. And the USA isn't even in the tournament.

Sticking with the Spanish clubs, Sevilla hosted favorites FC Bayern in Spain. The game got off to a wild start, with Sevilla taking a 1-0 lead behind a 32' strike by Pablo Sarabia. However, celebrations were cut short just five minutes later when Jesus Navas put the ball into his own net to make it a 1-1 game. Now with an away goal, the German champions were in strong shape entering the second half, and looked even better after the 68' minute when Thiago Alcantara gave Bayern a 2-1 lead.

Sevilla will now be forced to travel to Germany, where Bayern has been nearly unbeatable this season, to try and make a comeback in the second leg. To do this, Sevilla will have to take more risks going forward which will lead to more chances on the other end for Robert Lewandowski, one of the world's greatest strikes. While the scoreline may be most favorable in this matchup, Bayern is a completely different team at the Allianz Arena and with more opportunities for Lewandowski up front, it could turn into a lopsided final tally by the end of the second leg.

The last of the four quarterfinal ties was an all-English contest, with Liverpool hosting Manchester City. Many expected this to be the most evenly balanced pair-up of the round, with City being the slight favorites. That was until manager Jurgen Klopp put on a coaching clinic and led Liverpool to a 3-0 first leg victory. Mohamed Salah, as it usually is, opened the scoring for Liverpool in the 12' minute followed by fellow wingers Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain and Sadio Mane later on in the first half.

Manchester City simply had no answers on either side of the pitch against their English rivals, failing to register a true challenge for Liverpool goalkeeper Loris Karius to deal with and struggled to slow down the Reds' rapid attack. Despite this, if any team can comeback from a three goal hole it's the Premier League leading Manchester City.

City has had a nearly perfect season so far and that's mainly due to the brilliance of manager Pep Guardiola. Pep's taken his tactics that have achieved glory in the past and implemented them onto his new club, leading to City dominating the English league and getting to this round of the Champions League.

Now going home to the Etihad, Guardiola will be tasked with figuring out what went wrong in the first leg and make the necessary adjustments in the second fixture. With the likes of Sergio Aguero, Kevin De Bruyne, and Gabriel Jesus (among others) to choose from, Manchester City will pull off the monumental comeback and move on to the Champions League semi finals.

Tags: Dominic Hoscher, From the Bleachers, Houston Astros, Opinions, Professional Sports, sports opinions, UEFA Champions League

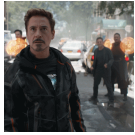
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